

Business and Society Review

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at Bentley College

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OF LEISURE

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SUMMER	CONTENTS	106:2
	FIVE CONCERNS REGARDING THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF LEISURE by Richard L. Lippke	107
	BIOETHICS: THE NEW FRONTIER by Alison Taunton-Rigby	127
	CONTEXTUALIZING BUSINESS ETHICS by Willard F. Enteman	143
	THE FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION AND ELECTRONIC COMMERCE SECURITY POLICY: A VIABLE SOLUTION? by Thomas A. Hemphill	161
	GLOBALIZATION: ITS DEFENDERS AND DISSENTERS by James W. Thomson	170
	REVIEWS	
	A REVIEW OF JEFF SCHMIDT'S DISCIPLINED MINDS: A CRITICAL LOOK AT SALARIED PROFESSIONALS AND THE SOUL-BATTERING SYSTEM THAT SHAPES THEIR LIVES by Marc J. Stern	180

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A Review of Jeff Schmidt's *Disciplined Minds: A Critical Look at Salaried Professionals and the Soul-Battering System That Shapes Their Lives*

MARC J. STERN

From 1975 to 1977 I lived in a graduate student group house that included two physicists. Both were hard working and loved their chosen craft. One, the more theoretical, idiosyncratic, and, I believe, the smarter and more creative of the two, washed out of his program after two years with a terminal master's. He just did not fit in. He took his rejection hard, but the last I heard, he was a computer professional and manager. He could not even stand to read physics studies, however, as this material just brought up too many painful memories. The other, better connected in the labs and more sociable, finished his Ph.D. working on laser technology. He was committed to the peaceful uses of lasers. He swore he'd never do military work. He went on to build and test lasers for the military. He is a professional scientist.

In *Disciplined Minds*, Jeff Schmidt, a graduate physicist (Ph.D., UC-Irvine) and an editor at *Physics Today*, attacks in scathing and confrontational language what he believes to be the mind- and soul-crushing world of professional work and training. He gives no quarter in this polemical screed. He denounces the indoctrination of apprentices in the "mysteries" of the professions (broadly defined to include almost all employed brain workers whose work demands

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advanced degrees from accredited institutions) as crafting people skilled in technical arts without critical thinking, social conscience, or the will to resist. Indeed, one chapter literally relies on an army training manual used to advise troops on how to resist brain-washing while a prisoner of war. And war it is to him; it is “them versus us.”

Schmidt assesses professionals’ work lives, concluding that “the hidden root of much career dissatisfaction is the professional’s lack of control over the political component of his or her creative work” (p. 2). Starting out hoping “to make a difference,” most professionals become tools of an oppressive and all-consuming, hierarchical, gendered, and racist system whose goal is global domination for the American military-industrial-university complex. Such people would be dangerous to hierarchies if they thought critically and challenged both their own subordination and the oppression of others. To remain in a position where their work is self-directed (if not self-selected), however, they must become conservative and accept the system’s goals as their own.

Schmidt begins by examining the professionalized strata in our society. Rooted in corporate capitalism founded on a heightened division of labor, he takes this to mean those service workers (in medicine, administration, law, engineering, the arts, and education, to name but a few fields) graced with appropriate degrees by credentialing institutions (universities). He also includes “certain low-level executives . . . people who make up the corps of salaried MBAs.” Although smugly self-satisfied in their “liberalism” about distant matters, most professionals are, he argues, conservative about workplace issues that matter to the vast majority of working people. They validate social-institutional hierarchies and legitimate their own place in them at the expense of others. They are, of necessity, reliable managers who must accept the ideological norms of their employers to function as semi-autonomous, self-directing workers. They hold no monopoly on knowledge—many nonprofessionals know as much about their subjects—but can act based on their own judgment to promote their employer’s and/or establishment interests. Their work cannot be completely routinized: they are charged with making ideological decisions of a sort at odds with the mechanical range allowed nonprofessionals. They are thus supposedly constrained by law but are, in fact, more heavily controlled by hierarchically mandated, system-wide ideological codes. True

creativity and critical thinking are replaced by “playpen” variants. The professions differ as to their basic “ways of thinking,” but at heart, all buttress the ideology of hierarchy and subordination inherent in modern capitalist life. Their minds have truly become disciplined to work within and sustain “the box.”

A physicist, Schmidt uses scientists and scientific training as his primary case. True freedom of inquiry, the supposed essence of the sciences, is, he suggests, sorely prescribed by the centrality of government and corporate funding. Scientists will turn their work toward the money the way a plant bends to reach sunlight, naturally and without thinking. Industry and government scientists, meanwhile, try to satisfy their own sense of independence by choosing from among the projects their employers suggest. Research work is bounded early on through training in particular projects sponsored by the military or other governmental agencies or corporations acting as surrogates. Enmeshment in the work of physics, regardless of the funding, floats a cloak of scientific virtue over projects so that many researchers see themselves as pure scientists, not as agents of the military-industrial complex. Scientists may disdain empire-building “grantsmen” who cater to federal budgets as servants to a master, but they bring in dollars and build programs that drive the engine of scientific reproduction. To maintain one’s career and job, one must adapt to the market’s demands, not simply pursue what interests you. More importantly, one must avoid following agendas contrary to the corporatist state’s interests. As Schmidt demonstrates, specialization in R&D fits nicely into the hierarchical systems that keep knowledge fragmented among its developers but integrated at the core. Of course, “sub-professions,” such as nursing, teaching, etc., have even less freedom to define their work and focus.

Higher income, status, improved working conditions, and the capacity to choose more aspects of one’s work motivate people to enter into professional work. But corporate or institutional dominance means that professionals must serve those interests, not really direct their own work lives. Promotion within professional ranks often hinges on such work; it is not guaranteed. Creativity thus yields to perceived necessity.

Still, competition for admittance to professional schools is keen, and *Disciplined Minds* comes most alive when describing the education system. Those denied entrance often either reproach

themselves for their personal failure or assign blame to those few who gain admittance through affirmative action programs for their personal failure. The system wins either way. Professional educators cloaked in the mantle of objectivity stand as gatekeepers, enforcing their values on an applicant pool, and weeding out those viewed as deficient by some abstract standard. Women and minorities are especially prone to rejection in this process, and Schmidt supports affirmative action that creates special slots for historically disadvantaged populations. In any event, the process is political from the get-go, with outlook and attitude the primary variables. Those from working-class backgrounds denied promotions to the middle-class professions often become the technicians who implement their “betters” dictates. Schmidt seeks to shatter all such divisions-of-labor and hierarchy, and is so committed to this approach as to applaud the Chinese Cultural Revolution’s practice of sending professionals to the countryside for years of hard labor. His defense of his policy, however, strikes me as weak, historically incomplete, and breathtakingly naive.

After admission, professional training “narrows the political spectrum,” as students become less idealistic and more exhausted from their work. Those who attempt to preserve a broad view of their field and remain connected to the world are cast out by professors who see that they do not have “the right stuff” to be members of the club. They lack the monomaniacal fervor, the glad-handing obsequiousness, or both, required for admittance. Socio-intellectual goals are replaced by selfish commitments to compensation and rising in one’s field. Work to prepare for exams and complete assignments for credentialing come to dominate life. Qualifying exams “imposed[,] precisely because they are *not* relevant” (p. 37) combine both objective and subjective grading and allow gatekeepers to admit or exclude as they wish with relative impunity, as they did with my housemate long ago. Tricks—not the study of the discipline—dominate exam preparation. This preparatory process transforms the student from a truth seeker into an alienated knowledge worker, serving as cheap labor in a professor’s research project. They become professionals seeking institutional advancement not knowledge. Subordinate and disciplined minds, they are ready for professional work.

Overall, Schmidt views this training as something akin to entering a cult. The profession: promises positive changes in your life,

seeks to control your environment completely, demands obedience to the views of leaders/professors, uses guilt and shaming to promote activity, promotes total vulnerability on the part of its members, has its own scientific dogma and worldview, takes away self-confidence, and claims to be the only path to salvation. To help the reader combat this indoctrination, Schmidt relies on an army manual on resisting brainwashing. He argues for creating alliances with other oppressed students and colleagues and proposes ways to sustain integrity and self-esteem in the face of demoralizing professionalization. In the end, however, he concludes that the only way to resist this process is to become truly radicalized. To operationalize this goal, he offers a handy list of 31 things you can do at school or on the job to keep your “self” intact and pursue the radical goals you know are necessary to create a democratic and human-centered society. The only way to survive as a critical thinker, he suggests, is to set yourself in perpetual opposition to the system, the establishment, your employer, and the very notion of professionalism.

There is much that is thought provoking and illuminating in *Disciplined Minds*, but there are some serious problems with this study. Indeed, it’s difficult to remain focused on them, because the piece is frequently smug in its tone and scattered in its organization. Leaving aside his limited presentation of nonprofessional work, I will look at his treatment of professionalization.

Some of the problems with *Disciplined Minds* seem to flow from the fact that it was not written by a professional analyst of professions. It is intended for potential professional students, professionals, political activists, and interested “lay” readers, but the book ignores most of the vast body of literature that already exists beyond the synopses presented in the mass media and a few supportive studies. It is not clear whether Schmidt is unfamiliar with this literature or whether he chooses to ignore it as irrelevant and tainted. In addition, this is an entirely descriptive study, providing little in the way of statistical data regarding the phenomena he describes. Descriptive research is fine, and I have seen many of the things he chronicles, but I have also seen the opposite. I have witnessed situations where professors exploited, repressed, and shamed their graduate students and others, where they were incredibly helpful and supportive, open to views quite at odds with their own, where they gave their students almost unlimited

freedom to write and think. And unlike the sciences where most of the work is done in a professor's lab, much research in the humanities is largely independent and unsupervised for months at a time. We need to know which is the more common experience, and hard data on these matters would help.

Some of these problems may also arise from his use of physics as the archetypal profession. In contrast to the mandatory full-time graduate training he denounces in the natural sciences, many people pursue professional degree work part-time while working and holding down other professional or nonprofessional positions. These folks often enter cognizant of the compromises they are making and desirous of increased compensation and status they hope their labors will bring. That is why they are there. And unlike the natural sciences that have maintained their illusion of independence while becoming wholly owned subsidiaries of the corporate-military state, many of the disciplines and professions he lumps together, including my own, history, have experienced their humbling fall from grace in a painfully self-conscious manner. These "fallen" professionals still attempt to pursue intellectual freedom in research and presentation, but they have also accepted their status as servants of some institution: higher education, the corporation, etc. Members of these professions seem to be conscious of that devil's bargain while attempting to retain core personal and intellectual values. They neither trumpet nor deny the compromises they have had to make, and most members of "the club" do not delude themselves about their virtue and autonomy. Finally, but hardly fully, his critique of the totalizing institution is itself rooted in a totalizing ideology. Only those who accept his vision, Schmidt seems to say, can become or remain free, and he presumes to use himself as a model, an example for the rest of us to follow, while publicly settling scores with his graduate school professors.

Still, there is much to *recommend* aspects of Schmidt's case; it cannot simply be dismissed out of hand and should not be ignored. He rightly rejects the notion of hierarchical virtue in mental as opposed to creative physical work, indeed he demystifies the privileging of theory over experimental physics as he critiques the privileging of professional versus nonprofessional work. His model also resonates with what many of us undoubtedly experienced in graduate or professional schools. Each of us saw very talented people unjustly "purged" from graduate school or work for failure to

conform. Schmidt's failure to follow them after their expulsion from the garden—and most, I suspect, wind up in other professions—and his assumption about their career trajectories is unfortunate, but it does not change the reality of organizing a professional craft from the inside. Most professionals have also had moments when we perform as desired by institutions even though we disagree with their programs, processes, or goals. We have been conditioned to perform as professionals and professional life within institutions is largely conservative. The work is not always rewarding or creative. At all but the highest reaches of research and creative graduate teaching, professional work is, after all, employment as well as a profession. In the end, as he suggests, many professionals have become servants—disciplined minds—of the masters who forged their chains.